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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 000080

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: SECULARIST-ISLAMIST DIVIDE IN NEW DEMOCRACY  
NETWORK

Classified By: Peter Mulrean, Director, MEPI Regional Office, Reasons 1  
.4 b and d.

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The Network of Democrats in the Arab World was officially launched in Casablanca on December 17, 2005. Funded by DRL, the network brings together democracy activists of both "secular" and "Islamist" leanings. While differences between those two camps emerged quickly around the details of the network,s organization, charter, etc., participants also found significant common ground on the importance of promoting democracy in the face of challenges from both authoritarian regimes and Islamic extremists. They have formed working groups to hash out the details of the network,s founding documents and work plans, which will be adopted when they meet again in Istanbul in April. The conference exposed the difficulties secularists and Islamists face in attempts to collaborate on promoting democratic reform, given disagreement on significant underlying philosophical issues. At the same time, participants demonstrated a determination to overcome differences in order to build moderate alternatives in the middle of the political spectrum. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

12. (U) Note: This cable uses the term "Islamist" with some hesitation, but for lack of a better word. Individual participants in the Casablanca conference who are described as Islamist have views ranging from full commitment to an open, democratic system, which they believe is compatible with a personal pursuit of Islam; to those who are seeking a democratic system that can accommodate Islamic practices more formally; to a couple, who seem interested in finding a hybrid that includes democratic practices, but is consistent with Sharia law.

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LAUNCHING A NETWORK  
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13. (SBU) On December 16-17, 62 Arab democracy activists and four observers, including representatives from DRL and the MEPI Regional Office in Tunis, attended a conference in Casablanca to discuss the formal constitution of the "Network of Democrats in the Arab World" (NDAW). Creation of the network is the objective of a DRL-funded project being implemented by U.S.-based NGOs Partners for Democratic Change (PDC) and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID). While never stated explicitly, the objective is also to bridge differences between secularists and Islamists who are committed to democracy. The hope is that they can make common cause in a pan-Arab network that will expand from conference participants to include other NGOs and individuals

concerned with the promotion of democracy in the Arab World. Discussions included development of a network charter and statutes, as well as a short-term work plan to include training, reports and publications and future meetings.

¶4. (U) The Casablanca meeting was an expansion of a September gathering arranged by CSID, when 15 Arab activists in the fields of democracy and human rights -- including both leading secularist and Islamists -- met in Amman to discuss development of the network. While the Casablanca conference was the official launch of the new network, there was no agreement on the charter, statutes and other key issues.

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SHAKY ON THE LAUNCHING PAD  
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¶5. (SBU) Several procedural differences among participants were related to the role of CSID. One major point of contention had to do with the structure of the proposed network. As initially conceived in the agreement with DRL, the Network was to be led by CSID, as the organizing body, and to include a Coordination Committee of 15 members, in addition to several working groups (e.g., Membership, Parties and Associations, Training and Capacity Building, Advocacy, Constitutional Reform, Funding). Two offices are to be created, in Jordan and Morocco. While there was general agreement on the need for such a network, an overwhelming majority at the conference opposed the idea of CSID controlling this new entity.

¶6. (SBU) Participants suggested instead that a General Committee be formed, with controlling members elected once

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the charter and statutes were approved. Participants agreed to split into the several working groups to outline activities and develop a common schedule. Subcommittees were constituted to design the charter and statutes, to promote the network among Arab NGO,s active in the field of democracy and human rights, and to conduct a public advocacy campaign to attract donor attention and funds. The next meeting will take place in Istanbul in April, when working groups will submit their reports and the charter and statutes are expected to be adopted. The immediate objective is to register the network legally and start collecting membership requests and fees from participants to reach a membership base of 1,000 within one year.

¶7. (C) During the conference, it was clear that for many secularist participants, some of the concern about CSID had to do with its views on Islam. They wondered whether CSID could accurately reflect the full range of views of the proposed network, since they view CSID as having Islamist leanings, however moderate. Interestingly, at the same time, a number of the Islamists expressed wariness about CSID, which they felt had made too many "concessions" to secularism in its approach.

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COMMON GROUND NONETHELESS  
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¶8. (SBU) In spite of the differences, the network,s initiators were able to identify essential common ground around a set of objectives, including a variety of ways to move forward in the face of authoritarian regimes and to support persecuted democrats and human rights activists across the Arab World. Throughout the conference, interactions between the Islamist and secularist representatives were seen as extremely positive and productive, not only during the official sessions, but also during breaks and after working hours. While Islamists represented about two-thirds of the participants, the discussions were balanced, with everyone participating including critical comments by each group of the other --

aided in large part by the skills of the moderators -- until a consensus could be reached.

¶9. (SBU) The key theme for the gathering emerged from remarks by opening speakers: it is essential for all Arab democrats to move beyond their differences regarding the role of religion and work together to face authoritarian regimes. Participants stressed that present regimes have been taking advantage of weak opposition, which is scattered in a multitude of parties and entities, resulting in the waste of resources and competences. There was strong consensus that Arab activists should focus on three major areas:  
-- countering misrepresentations about Islam inside and outside the region;  
-- engaging the West where its interests overlapped with the interests of the Arab world; and  
-- encouraging youth to become more active in public life.

¶10. (SBU) A lively, but collegial, Islamist-secularist debate permeated the sessions. When some speakers preached the democratic values of Islam and the virtues of Muslim theories, they were immediately countered by "secular" ideas, especially regarding freedom of thought and choice. Participants agreed that democracy can in no way be imposed from outside, although learning from others, experiences should be recommended. Apart from one Moroccan, Mohamed Yatim, MP for the Islamist Party for Justice and Development, all expressed appreciation for DRL funding of the conference. Participants even selected the MEPI RO representative to moderate the working session on financing. MEPI information packets were distributed to all participants, and 10 individual meetings were held to further describe MEPI's goals and programs.

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Key Players  
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¶11. (C) Due to CSID's role in launching the network, Radwan Masmoudi, CSID President, was the main actor prior to the conference in designing the list of participants, coordinating the program, and ensuring logistical support. Masmoudi contends that democracy and Islam are not only

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compatible, but that Islam in fact requires democratic practices by its faithful. The key is finding a way to promote these democratic values inspired by Islam in the face of both authoritarian governments and Islamic extremists. During the conference, three other figures emerged as key actors during debates:

-- Dr. Fayez Al Rabeh, former Jordanian Ambassador and currently Secretary General of the Amman-based Moderation Assembly for Thought and Culture, an NGO trying to build up an international moderate Islamists, network, including activists from South-East Asia, Sudan and the Middle East. Dr. Al Rabeh was lobbying to place Jordanian activists from the pro-Islamic and centrist Al Ghad party in the different sub-committees.  
-- Amel Aouidha, an Egyptian woman journalist and researcher, working for the Cairo Al Ahram, active in the Nationalist movement, espousing pan-Arab views and support for a clear separation of church and state. Amel's role in the Network will focus on coordinating advocacy and research  
-- Mohsen Marzouk, a Tunisian activist working for Freedom House, with strong secularist views, completely opposed to the use of religion in politics.

Other key players included the Tunisian moderate Islamist Slaheddine Jourchi (the Network's spokesperson), the Jordanian secularist Samir Al Jarrah (coordinating the Charter subcommittee), and the Algerian Islamist Abderrazzak Kassoum, Member of Parliament on behalf of the Algerian party Hamas.

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COMMENT

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¶12. (C) The Casablanca meeting laid bare the challenges facing attempts by Islamist and secularist camps to collaborate, even when they can agree on priority areas for common action. Despite all the collegiality, there is no denying underlying wariness by each side of the other. At the same time, the participants demonstrated a determination to try to focus on the common ground and find a modus operandi that will allow them to support each other's efforts. They realize that the political spectrum across most of the region has had the middle excised, excluding moderates of all stripes. This often leaves people with a "false choice" between the extremes of maintaining an authoritarian regime or turning to a radical Islamist alternative. While many participants with whom we spoke are sanguine that this experiment could fail if their philosophical differences are insurmountable, they believe it is a potentially important step in the fight to create the moderate "middle band" with broad appeal. Most previous attempts to forge democratic forces in the center have not enjoyed cooperation between secularists and Islamists, nor have they attempted to directly address how Islam and democracy are compatible.

¶13. (C) The network will certainly last as long as the current funding brings it together. Its ultimate success and sustainability, however, will depend on a combination of getting some of the details right early on and managing the secularist/Islamist differences in a way that keeps the network's eye on the longer-term democratic goal. In the short term, the efforts by the working groups on the charter, statutes, financing, and action plan will be essential. If the April meeting in Istanbul can demonstrate strong consensus on both the founding principles and road ahead, the network will be able to move beyond internal debate to the real work of promoting the democratic middle.

HUDSON